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ABSTRACT

A systems perspective recognizes the necessity of drawing on numerous resources for strengthening the family. The dream interpretation group method, in some ways an elitist approach, focuses on the transitional individual as the nodal point for building family strengths. The individual experiencing changes in identity development is equipped with a great reservoir of unconscious strengths and solutions. This storehouse of knowledge is revealed through the dream. Meaning in dreams can become conscious through work in the dream group, enabling awareness of a whole host of conflict resolutions not previously available to the waking individual. Dream group leaders should be familiar with how to translate dreams to make them meaningful and should accept all dreams presented in the group. Group leaders should understand what the dream has to do with the life of the person and if the dream gives a course of action to be taken. Specific interpretation methods include conceptualization, free association, precognitive, compensatory, and symbolic. With current theories and methods of dream interpretation, the group leader possesses a value system and body of techniques supportive of growth, and facilitative of the individual's ability to use dreams in such a way as to strengthen his/her intrapersonal, interpersonal, familial, and community identity. (Author/ABL)

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Dream Interpretation Groups: Facilitating Identity Development of Adolescents and Young Adults

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RUNNING HEAD: Dream Groups

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Abstract

A systems perspective recognizes the necessity of drawing on numerous resources for strengthening the family. The dream interpretation group method, in some ways an elitist approach, focuses on the transitional individual as the nodal point for building family strengths. The individual experiencing changes in identity development is equipped with a great reservoir of unconscious strengths and solutions. This storehouse of knowledge is revealed through the dream. Meaning in dreams can become conscious through work in the dream group, enabling awareness of a whole host of conflict resolutions not previously available to the waking individual. In coupling the community enhancing dream culture perspective of the Senoi with current theories and methods of dream interpretation, the group leader possesses a value system and body of techniques supportive of growth, and facilitative of the individual's ability to use dreams in such a way as to strengthen his/her intrapersonal, interpersonal, familial and community identity.

Dream Interpretation Groups: Facilitating Identity Development of Adolescents and Young Adults

Over the past decade a systemic ecological perspective has emerged in the helping professions, making Building Family Strengths a concern relevant to all corners of educational, psychosocial and medical communities. A systems perspective requires attention to influences and resources coming from multiple sources, and demands interventions of a varied and eclectic nature. Dream interpretation groups for adolescents and young adults is an intervention model that chooses the transitional individual as the nodal point of contact for work within the family.

The dream interpretation group method is in some ways an elitist approach. Problems for minority group systems based on WASP values cannot be addressed in a dream interpretation group. It might, however, be useful to use dreams to teach people to find alternatives to these kinds of difficulties. Dreams evolve from a great reservoir of knowledge and thus permit contact with a history of strengths and solutions, at least as well as with experiences of personal hardships.

The Senoi are Malaysian Pacific Islanders, numbering 20-30,000 in all, who live in groups of 15-100

along isolated river valleys in highland jungles of West Malaysia (Domhoff, 1985). Kilton Stewart (1951) was the first to report on the Senoi's dream culture after his visit to Malaysia in 1934. Since Stewart's travels, Patricia Garfield (1974) in 1972 and Anne Faraday in 1982 and 1983 have also had direct contact with the Senoi. Gail Delaney has made a trip to West Malaysia recently. According to Delaney, the dream ceremonies described early on by Stewart and confirmed by later writers may no longer be extant in that culture (Krippner, personal communication, April, 1986).

The Senoi have been described as a highly socially oriented people who focus on dreams as a way to resolve inter and intrapersonal difficulties. The Senoi may have once been able to be elitists in using dream groups to aid the entire culture. Their socially based alternatives for a child to not be attacked by her/his nighttime lions, for example, by encouraging fighting, tricking or especially befriending the beast - or their support of an individual feeling begrudgement toward a neighbor in their dream to meet with that foe and discuss the issue (Garfield, 1974), can be coupled with a rather large bank of theoretical and therapeutic dreamwork methods to develop an ecological, strengths building approach (e.g. Faraday, 1972: 1974). Such an

approach to dream interpretation should respect the individual context, as well as the fundamental developmental similarities of the dream group member.

The dream group discussed in the present writing is not organized for the purpose of long-term intrapsychic reorganization. However, intrapsychic issues are bound to be raised as each person enters the group equipped with personal complexes and a reservoir of distinctly personal symbolic dream language. While dream dictionaries might be used in groups to generate possible meanings for enigmatic symbols, they cannot possibly reflect the broad diversity of social and cultural, let alone individual, heritage so as to claim once and for all, for example, that dreaming of an apple signifies that plans will ripen, or perhaps rot in the case that the apple is worm infested.

The dream group begins with one or more committed leaders. The group can be either a specific or indeterminate number of sessions, and can be either closed, open or slow open, where new members join as others terminate. A place for meeting must be arranged. More important than logistics is the leader's belief in the usefulness of dreams as expressions of unconscious knowledge which, once tapped into and worked with, can

excite potential for positive growth not previously available to consciousness.

The group leader must also possess sensitivity to identity development issues pertinent to the individuals making up the group. Working with a group of same aged individuals, such as adolescents or young adults, has the advantage of homogeneity of experience among members. The leader should know these issues well enough to be free to forget them in favor of discovering from members themselves what is relevant and what is not. A relatively small group of about six individuals tends to generate greater intimacy and sharing between members than a somewhat larger group, as does the closed rather than open, or slow open group.

An essential task of the group leader is familiarity with how dreams can be translated from the enigmatic to the meaningful. It is his/her role to teach group members ways to interpret and make sense of their dreams. The leader facilitates identity development by encouraging member interaction on issues surrounding the dream themes. These themes must be allowed to emerge into discussions on waking life. In addition to possessing a certain degree of skill in dream interpretation then, the leader must be competent

and comfortable in the role of group therapist, and be able to switch back and forth from dream to waking life.

Perhaps one other necessary quality of the dream group leader, especially in the case of adolescent and children's groups, is the ability to be active. Depending on member age and level of maturity, more verbal and introspective work can be done; however, even with adults, potent interpretation and learning often occur with minimal verbal discourse. As in play therapy, the working out of difficulties on an unconscious level has great potential in dream group therapy.

A number of dream interpretation methods are available to the group leader. In general, the more one knows about dreams, the better equipped she/he will be to deal with their variegations. However, before presenting some of the more popular dream interpretation methods, something should be said about dream recall.

As early as the 1950s it was shown that probably everyone dreams; and that if dream sleep was prevented, a person becomes quite disturbed and even psychotic-like (Diamond, 1962). Nevertheless, people frequently report difficulty recalling dreams, and many request ways to improve it. Because there is some evidence that creative, intuitive people recall dreams more frequently

than do logical, orderly thinkers ("What Dreams," 1984), dream recall might be enhanced by engaging in more fantasy, perhaps just before bed. Other helpful techniques for remembering dreams include setting out paper and pen to record the dream, getting a full night's rest, and having time upon awakening to recall and record the dream. Other suggestions include imploring one's unconscious, G/d, or some other force to help with some issue during dream sleep, and discussing dreams with others during the day.

Because moderately high to high amounts of alcohol depress rapid eye movement (REM) sleep (the state from which dreams are most commonly recalled), limiting alcohol intake might stir up greater dream recall (MacKenzie, 1965). It also appears that dream life compensates for a lack of social interactions, as spending a day in relative isolation tends to increase the likelihood that dreams will be remembered (MacKenzie, 1965). The most agreed upon method of improving recallability, however, is in the dreamer's assuming the position that dreams are useful. Believability, like suggestability, must be a willful act.

Upon waking, the dream should be written down in full before the residues are lost to the day's events.

Sometimes thinking of important people or events in one's life can stimulate memory of a dream lost to consciousness upon waking. If these methods fail, one can still write down fantasies and free floating associations for use in the group.

All dreams presented in group are acceptable for interpretation. The fact that an individual has chosen to relate a dream, even one from childhood, suggests its relevance to their current life. It is, of course, possible that dwelling on the past is a resistance to dealing with current anxieties. Such resistance can be dealt with in the group; however, it is generally best to take what a person says at face value. If an interpretation is rejected, but is later suggested, it may be accepted the second time. As with other forms of group therapy, readiness to hear an interpretation is a key factor in determining its rightness. The group leader should permit the members to come to insight themselves whenever possible.

Two questions ought to consistently underlie the group leader's understanding of dreams. The first is, "What does this have to do with the life of the dreamer?" Second, the leader should ask, "Is this giving some direction or course of action to be taken?"

With these questions in mind we can proceed to look at some of the specific methods of interpreting dreams.

Calvin Hall (1953) elucidated a formula for thinking about dreams which is a good first step for the person new to interpretation. Hall's conceptualization helps demystify what are often seemingly elusive and enigmatic symbols. From his perspective, dreams can be broken down into four elements: Feelings; characters (including people, animals, monsters, etc.); places and events. Hall's basic elements can be added to and expanded upon (e.g. objects), but he was probably the first to attempt a schematization which made thinking about dreams a manageable task for the ordinary person. It is useful to ask dreamers about these elements as a way to begin uncovering meaning. Patterns in the elements may occur over a series of dreams, e.g. a similar kind of place with associated affect, leading to a richer understanding of the symbols and concerns central to the person's life.

An especially useful technique for revealing patterns in dream life is the free association method given by Freud (1900). Dreamers will often free associate without prompting as they begin to realize the helpfulness of this technique. The leader can encourage such associations by asking, "Does this remind you of

anything in your waking life?" She/he can assist associations between the elements, for example, questioning how the dreamer feels about an event, or if there are people in one's life who evoke similar feelings as the one experienced in the dream. This back and forth discussion sets up a complex interplay between the dream elements and the conscious concerns of the dreamer in his/her waking life.

Wishes are another force in dreams (Freud, 1900), and the leader can rely on the wish to answer many discrepancies found between dreams and waking life. For instance, one young woman described an anxiety dream where she felt as if she were "spinning into hell." Free association revealed: 1) that the diamond shaped lights she saw in the distance were similar to her sheets at home several years before; and 2) that the "only thing" going on in her waking life was wondering what to do upon graduation - but that this was "nothing she really worried about." The anxiety in the dream representing hidden fears about becoming more independent was discovered eventually by her increasing acceptance that the lights were her sheets from earlier childhood days - which mother would wash for her - which kept her safe and secure. She wished to go back to

those days and not have to confront making decisions about a career.

Dreams can be precognitive, and some people have developed a way to know whether they are, such as with a feeling, or seeing clocks in such dreams. Even with prescient dreams, however, there is usually some personal issue surrounding the dream. Extrasensory perception research reveals that emotional involvement between sender and recipient is an important factor in the accuracy of such telepathic communications (Krippner, personal communication, April 10, 1986).

Similarly, the prescient dream often involves some emotional involvement making the prescience possible. In the example cited above, the young woman early on suggested that her dream might have been a precognition concerning the suicide, on the following day, of her boyfriend's uncle ("spinning into hell"). Although other dreams are more certainly prescient (the events in the dream come true for the dreamer later), it was important to follow her line of thinking with belief, exploring the possibility of prescience rather than denying it. One young Jewish woman dreamt of a crab with a missing leg. The following day she went crabbing with her family and not to her surprise, the last crab to be placed in the pot for cooking lay dead at the

bottom of the basket with its leg missing. Further exploration revealed this young woman's conflict with the Jewish dietary laws prohibiting the eating of shellfish on the one hand, and her concomitant desire to join her family in their afternoon crabbing on the bay.

One of the masters of dream interpretation was Jung (1960), from whom the notion of dreams as compensatory is derived. That dreams are compensatory means that they reveal aspects of the self which are either over or underdeveloped. The dream group leader is greatly assisted once equipped with this awareness. A reoccurring symbol of one dreamer was her car. She began to lose her car in dreams, was unable to remember where she parked it, in one instance was unable to steer properly, and in another had lost control of her brakes. Upon inquiry it was discovered that her car symbolized control, and the ability to come and go as she pleased. It soon became evident that her dreams were revealing the extremeness with which she attempted to keep control over several aspect of her life.

When an interpretation fits, the dreamer will know (it is possible that more than one interpretation will fit). Sometimes she/he has a sense that it may be partially correct, or that it sounds right but pieces are missing. After further exploration, pieces will

begin to fit together. When the leader, other members or the dreamer him/herself hits upon a correct interpretation the individual will experience the infamous "aha" experience - that shift of experiencing where meaning has been carried forward. Two of the possible lead-ins to an interpretation are "Could this be saying . . .," and "It sounds like your dream might be saying . . . ."

A powerful way to look at dream symbols is employed by the gestalt therapists. Their approach, developed largely from the work of Jung, involves viewing all elements of the dream as aspects of the self. The dream leader should familiarize her/himself with gestalt techniques in order to use this approach. This approach is active, involving several group members "playing out" various parts in the dream scenario. The dreamer can take on the role of the antagonist, the protagonist, the conductor, etc. Moreno (1985) describes a gestaltian-sociodramatic technique wherein the entire dream is recreated beginning with the dreamer preparing to go to sleep. In one group led by the present author, a young woman going through this process shared a dream that she had not originally intended to bring up, but which seemed more pressing once the stage had been set for sleep. With group members playing the parts, she became

deeply emotionally involved with the events occurring in the dream. The ability to direct a play in which one can act with a here and now focus is a potent resource for the group leader.

An offshoot of the gestalt approach is the technique of speaking for the symbol. If ones assumes the position that all dream elements represent an aspect of the self, then much can be learned by having the dreamer act out the symbol. The dreamer can be asked to describe in first person how it feels to be that thing. An approach that some take is to say "Describe that object as if I were a Martian, and knew nothing about it." One group member who "became" a blue sequenced purse revealed much about its meaning when she said "I am getting old, and somewhat out of style, but I'm bright and shiny. I hold money and belong to a wealthy woman with gray hair." In the context of the total dream, the blue sequence purse revealed a great deal about the dreamer's conflicts with wanting to donate to charities and defend liberal causes, and yet often "frivolously" spending 30 dollars over the weekend. The purse revealed the dreamer's belief in a dichotomy between the old age of concern for one's fellows, and the new age of materialism and hunger for power, and her

own difficulty establishing a personal identity in the midst of this confusion.

Although many approaches to dreams exist that have not been taken up in this discussion, enough has been said to provide a springboard for the individual interested in helping others to work with their dreams. A very useful way to become comfortable and adept in the dream group method is to join a group oneself. The potential dream group leader should at least begin to record and work with her/his own dreams regularly, even if only on an individual basis.

Dreams are psychological phenomena, artifacts of the dreamer's experience with the world in which she/he lives. External stimuli may impinge upon the person, influencing what is dreamt; however, as the alarm clock buzzes, one person may dream of a saw cutting down the forest, and the second may imagine a high school fire drill. Dreams are personal, and yet there are a number of ways in which they can be generally perceived. Wishes, compensations, and aspects of the self are a few of the manifestations that dream symbols can take.

Perhaps the most important generality that can be made about dreams is their ability to reveal potential and knowledge extant in the unconscious mind. A great reservoir of strengths and solutions to intrapersonal,

interpersonal, familial and community relations exists within each person. It is the leader's role to encourage the expression of each member's potential for positive growth, enabling the individual her/himself to create change.

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